

A long and winding road

License plates through the years

- 1903 – Individual cities in Michigan begin issuing license plates.
- 1905 – The Michigan Secretary of State assumes the responsibility of statewide vehicle registration with the enactment of Public Act 196. Early plates are simply engraved aluminum discs usually displayed on the dashboard.
- 1910 – Michigan issues its first actual license plates. In addition, the state begins issuing plates for motorcycles.
- 1914 – The annual fee for registering an automobile or motorcycle is set at a flat rate of \$3. Some states set fees according to a vehicle's horsepower.
- 1918 – Plates are first manufactured by the state's prison system. In 1919 production went back to the private sector, only to return to the prison system in 1920.
- 1920 – Trailer plates are issued for the first time.
- 1933 – Half-year passenger and trailer plates are issued in response to the Depression.
- 1935 – Veterans are recognized with plates having a "Vv" designation.
- 1939 – In search of a workable numbering system, the state adopts a Detroit police officer's recommendation of the two-letter, four-number system that was used from 1940 to 1970.
- 1943 – Metal tabs are issued and attached to the previous year's plate in an effort to conserve metal for the World War II effort.
- 1954 – The phrase "Water Wonderland" is incorporated on plates. Also, the 1954 plates have a maize-on-blue color combination to honor the University of Michigan.
- 1955 – The green-and-white color combination salutes Michigan State University.
- 1956 – A standard size is implemented for all U.S. license plates and is still used today.
- 1965 – Galvanized steel is used for the first time to make plates more resistant to Michigan's rugged winters. In addition, the phrase "Water-Winter Wonderland" replaces "Water Wonderland."
- 1968 – The license plate slogan is changed to "Great Lake State."
- 1970 – For the first time, plates carry the three-letter, three-numeral designation.

- 1971 – The Secretary of State’s program to make license plates available by mail begins.
- 1973 – Motorists get the option of ordering personalized plates.
- 1975 – The state issues its first plates for permanently disabled motorists
- 1976 – Michigan introduces its bicentennial plate to honor the nation’s 200th birthday.
- 1980 – Year-round registration of vehicles according to birth date begins, eliminating the annual end-of-February rush to renew registrations.
- 1981 – The state starts requiring only one license plate per vehicle. Two plates had been required since 1957.
- 1982 – Michigan issues a plate featuring a Lake Superior-blue background, which becomes known as “Old Blue.”
- 1983 – All of Michigan’s possible letter/number combinations are exhausted. The state begins issuing plates with the letters and numbers reversed.
- 1995 – Michigan issues a first-of-its-kind plate to help support the U.S. Olympic Education Center in Marquette.
- 1996 – Michigan offers a plate commemorating the centennial of the automobile industry as an alternative to the standard “Old Blue” plate. Nearly 2 million are purchased during the single year of availability.
- 1997 – The “Great Lakes Splendor” plate goes on sale. The design – featuring a brilliant sunrise over the Straits of Mackinac – emerges as the winner from a statewide contest conducted the previous year.
- 2000 – Fundraising plates to benefit Michigan’s 15 public universities are offered.
- 2001 – Motorists can buy fundraising plates to support six worthy causes: clean water, agricultural heritage, the Children’s Trust Fund, non-game wildlife habitat, lighthouse preservation and the Veterans’ Memorial Fund. Also, a “Proud To Be American” plate goes on sale in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.
- 2003 – Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land introduces “Plate It Your Way,” a convenient online program allowing customers to check the availability of the number/letter configuration for their personalized plates from the comfort of their homes.
- 2005 – Renewing plate tabs goes high-tech when Secretary Land unveils Self-Service Stations that let customers do business with the swipe of a credit card.
- 2006 – Secretary Land announces plans to redesign the standard “Old Blue” and commemorative “Great Lakes Splendor” plates. The new plates will be available Jan. 1, 2007.

Based on information provided by the Michigan Historical Center (www.michiganhistory.org), the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association (www.alpca.org) and the Michigan Department of State (www.Michigan.gov/sos)